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ABSTRACT

A characteristic common to differing forms of violence within families is the abuse of power. This study explored adolescents' understandings of power and control in marital relationships. Adolescents' reports of witnessing conflict and violence between their own parents were also considered as a context within which beliefs about power and attitudes toward women develop. Three questionnaires designed to explore adolescents' beliefs about power in marital relationships, their attitudes toward women, and their reports of violence between their parents, were completed by 353 high school students. Females reported more egalitarian beliefs about the exercise of power in marital relationships. Females recalled a level of violence within their homes that was significantly higher than that reported by males. Neither female nor male subjects reported significant differences in the frequency with which aggression, verbal or physical, was perpetrated by their fathers compared with their mothers. Both female and male students strongly rejected the exercise of physical power within marital relationships. The modest relations between male adolescents' reports of witnessing violence between their parents and their own attitudes about exercise of power in the marital relationship may also reflect complexity, not only in the sources of attitudes about power but also in the consequences of witnessing violence. Exploring such complexities will be valuable not only because of their intrinsic interest, but also because of their critically important implications for so many children and families. (ABL)

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Adolescents' Understandings of Power and Violence in Marital Relationships

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Abstract

Three questionnaires designed to explore adolescents' beliefs about power in marital relationships, their attitudes toward women, and their reports of violence between their parents, were completed by 353 high school students. The Attitudes Toward Marital Power Scale (AMPS) was developed in this study to reflect adolescents' attitudes toward marital power manifested through control, emotional abuse, and physical abuse by either husband or wife. Females reported more egalitarian beliefs about the exercise of power in marital relationships, as well as more liberal responses on a revised Short Version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973), than did males. Both female and male subjects strongly rejected those AMPS subscale items concerned with the exercise of power through physical abuse. In all other subscales of the AMPS, males were more tolerant of exercise of power than were females, whether that power was exercised by husband over wife or by wife over husband. This lends support to Gilligan's (1982) reports that males view the world through a hierarchical morality tied to a stystem of rules and regulations, while females tend to emphasize preservation of relationships and connectedness to others. No relationship existed between subjects' responses on the revised versions of the Conflict Tactics Scale (Straus & Gelles, 1990) and the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. For male subjects only, reports of higher levels of violence between their parents were modestly associated with less egalitarian views of power in the marital relationship.

Adolescents' Understandings of Power and Violence
in Marital Relationships

Violence within families is recognized as a major social problem. Current data suggest that one in six Canadian women is physically or sexually abused by her husband, ex-husband, or live-in partner each year and that at least one in ten women is severely physically and/or sexually assaulted by her husband, ex-husband, or live-partner (Lupri, 1989). Thirty-six percent of women report that they have been abused in an intimate relationship at some point in their lives, with 11.3% reporting being severely abused (Smith, 1990). Eichler (1988) has concluded that because of people's reluctance to identify and report violence in families the true incidence for violence in a marital relationship is probably closer to 50% or 60% of all couples. A characteristic common to differing forms of violence within families is the abuse of power (Finkelhor, 1983).

Power has been postitively conceptualized as an empowering energy (Martinez, 1988; Spretnak, 1982) emerging from such sources as one's inner strength and collective cooperation (Lips, 1981). Conversely, power has been viewed as a dominating force associated with conflict and struggle (Mcdonald, 1980) and with control over others' valued outcomes (Molm, 1985). Within the present study, power is understood as a negative force manifested through manipulative control, emotional abuse, and/or physical abuse of another.

Feminist analyses suggest that much abuse of power is rooted in our society's patriachal structure. Such analyses contend that male violence against women springs from the attitudes and values which perpetuate women's social, economic, and political inequality (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1991).

Several sources of data suggest that children who witness the abuse of power which is manifested in violence against women are at immediate and long term risk for maladjustment (Jaffe, Wolfe, & Wilson, 1990). For example, retrospective investigations find that both male perpetrators and female victims of violence are more likely than the general population to have witnessed wife abuse as children (e.g., Greaves, Heapy, & Wylie, 1988). Child witnesses tend to be rated significantly higher in behaviour problems and lower in social competence than children in comparison groups (Wolfe, Jaffe, Wilson, & Zak, 1985), with boys demonstrating greater impairment in behavioural functioning than girls (Stagg, Wills, & Howell, 1989). There remains, however, a great deal missing from our understanding of the experience of child and adolescent witnesses of marital violence.

This study explores adolescents' understandings of power and control in marital relationships. The relation between such understandings and adolescents' attitudes about women--their roles, status, and rights--is examined. Adolescents' reports of witnessing conflict and violence between their own parents are also considered as a context within which beliefs about power and attitudes toward women develop.

Method

Subjects and Procedure

Participants were 353 students, 170 females and 183 males, from a rural high school in Prince Edward Island, Canada. Ninety-one 15-year-olds, 119 16-year-olds, 89 17-year-olds, 47 18-year-olds, 4 19-year-olds, and 2 20-year-olds participated. 156 of the students were in tenth grade, 99 in eleventh, and 97 in twelfth. One subject did not report age or grade level.

Of the 353 students, 272 currently resided with their mother and father, 37 lived with their mother with no partner, 23 lived with mother and her new partner, four lived with their father and no partner, three lived with their father and his new partner, and the remaining 14 had alternate living arrangements.

Participants were members of classes recruited by the school principal. After hearing a description of the study and signing a consent form volunteer students anonymously completed a set of three questionnaires within a class period. Debriefing forms were provided to all participants after data collection in the school was completed.

Instruments

Revised version of Conflict Tactics Scale. Straus & Gelles (1990) have developed several versions of a Likert-type Conflict Tactics Scale (CTS) to assess levels of interspousal conflict and violence. These scales have demonstrated moderate

to high internal reliabilities and evidence of concurrent and construct validity (Straus & Gelles, 1990). A revision used in this study was based upon the CTS scale designed for use with college students asked to report their memories of their parents' conflictual behaviour; several items concerning more extreme forms of violence, such as use of weapons, were added from another CTS Scale, and two items were added based on consultation with staff at a local women's shelter. Participants who lived with their mother and father, or who recalled living with their mother and father, were asked to report the frequency (on a seven-point-scale) with which each parent displayed each of 42 conflict behaviours toward the other. Total CTS scores and separate verbal aggression and physical aggression indexes can be calculated; higher scores reflect higher levels of reported violence.

Revised Short Version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale. The Short Version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale (AWS) explores subjects' attitudes and beliefs concerning women's rights and roles in society (Spence, Helmreich, & Stapp, 1973). Scale items address such areas as vocational, intellectual, and educational activities, dating behaviour and etiquette, sexual behaviour, and marital relationships. Higher scores on this Likert-type scale reflect more liberal attitudes toward women. The AWS has been widely used over the last 20 years, with considerable evidence that it is a valid measure of attitudes about the rights and roles of women (e.g., Pomerantz & House, 1977; Leventhal & Matturo, 1981). The vocabulary and

phrasing of several AWS items were revised for this study to reflect language thought to be more commonly used in adolescent expression and communication. Two of the 25 items were deleted entirely in the revised AWS, one because it dealt with grounds for divorce, a matter with which we did not expect adolescents to be familar, and one because it dealt with premarital sex, and would potentially make approval of the study more difficult for school personnel. The shortened version of the AWS has been similarly revised in other studies (e.g., Galambos, Petersen, Richards, & Gitelson, 1985).

Attitudes Toward Marital Power Scale. The Attitudes Toward Marital Power Scale (AMPS) was developed in this study to reflect participants' beliefs about the exercise of power in marital relationships. 52 five-point Likert-type items were constructed after a review of the literature on the nature of power and its role within the family and between women and men, and after consultation with workers in a shelter for abused women. Questionnaire items were assigned to one of three subscales: (1) controlling power (e.g., male privilege, economic abuse, and isolation); (2) power based upon emotional abuse, and (3) power exercised through physical abuse. Each subscale was further divided to reflect use of power by husbands or by wives. High scores on the AMPS reflect more egalitarian attitudes about power in marital relationships. A subsequent reliability analysis warranted exclusion of eight of the original 52 items due to poor item correlations with their corresponding subscales (i.e., a correlation of less than .25).

A reliability analysis of the retained 44 items resulted in a Cronbach's Alpha level of .94 for the total AMPS. Table 1 reports the reliability levels of each of the AMPS Subscales.

Evidence suggesting concurrent validity of the AMPS is provided by its correlation with responses on the revised Short Version of the AWS for both female subjects, $r(159) = .61$, $p<.0005$, and male subjects, $r(158) = .66$, $p<.0005$.

Results

Revised Version of Conflict Tactics Scale

Total scores on the revised CTS can range from 0 to 252. Female subjects reported significantly higher levels of total violence between their parents ($M = 49.99$, $SD = 30.44$), than did male subjects ($M = 39.59$, $SD = 31.66$), $t(290) = 2.88$, $p<.004$. Females' higher scores were due to their reporting more verbal aggression by fathers, $t(286) = 4.01$, $p<.0005$, and by mothers, $t(287) = 4.34$, $p<.0005$, than reported by male subjects.

Neither female nor male subjects reported significant differences in the frequency with which aggression, verbal or physical, was perpetrated by their fathers compared with their mothers.

Subjects' age was not related to their total score on the revised CTS, $r(290) = -.04$, $p>.05$.

Revised Short Version of the Attitudes Toward Women Scale

The possible range of scores of the revised short version

Table 1

Attitudes Toward Marital Power Subscales, Cronbach's Alpha

(1) CONTROLLING POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES = .72

Example: "A wife should be allowed to say who her husband can or cannot talk to."

(2) CONTROLLING POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS = .91

Example: "Husbands are the ones in the family who should control all the money, including any money their wives make."

(3) CONTROLLING POWER, COMBINED = .51

Note: This subscale dropped from further analysis due to poor reliability.

(4) EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES = .77

Example: "Sometimes a wife has to tell her husband that he is stupid."

(5) EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS = .84

Example: "It is okay for a husband to embarrass his wife in front of others."

(6) EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER, COMBINED = .91

(7) PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES = .72

Example: "Sometimes a wife can't help it if she gets angry and hits her husband."

(8) PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER, WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS = .78

Example: "It is okay if a husband breaks his wife's things if he is really angry."

(9) PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER, COMBINED = .75

of the AWS was from 23 to 115 points. The mean score for females was 97.79 (*SD* = 10.18) while the mean score for males was 82.95 (*SD* = 13.97). In short, females reflected more liberal attitudes toward women than did males, $t(344) = 11.25$, $p<.0005$. As was the case in the original shortened AWS, females scored significantly higher on all AWS subscales as well.

Scores on the revised short version of the AWS were not related to subjects' age, $r(344) = -.09$, $p>.05$.

Attitudes Toward Marital Power Scale

Scores on the total AMPS can range from 44 to 220 points. Both female and male subjects tended to provide rather egalitarian responses. Female subjects reported more egalitarian beliefs (*M* = 199.01, *SD* = 15.77), about the expression of power in marital relationships than did male subjects (*M* = 182.20, *SD* = 26.71), $t(324) = 6.90$, $p<.0005$.

As seen in Table 2, significant sex differences existed for all subscales of the AMPS, with the exception of those dealing with power exerted through physical force. Both female and male students strongly rejected the exercise of physical power within marital relationships. Even for subscales with significant sex differences, both females and males scored toward the egalitarian end of the scale; however, females consistently exhibited stronger egalitarian beliefs than did males. Indeed, male students were more tolerant than females of the exercise of power whether that power was exercised by husband over wife or by wife over husband.

Table 2

Sex Differences for Subscales of Attitudes Toward Marital Power Scale

AMPS	Males	Females	
Subscales	Mean Scores	Mean Scores	
Controlling power with privilege for wives (7 to 35 points)	28.89 (4.20)	30.34 (3.48)	$t(349) = 3.51^{*}$
Controlling power with privilege for husbands (17 to 85 points)	62.56 (12.40)	75.14 (7.50)	$t(351) = 11.43^{**}$
Emotional abuse power with privilege for wives (7 to 35 points)	29.66 (4.84)	32.24 (3.26)	$t(347) = 5.80^{**}$
Emotional abuse power with privilege for husbands (7 to 35 points)	29.45 (5.65)	32.60 (3.18)	$t(347) = 6.38^{**}$
Combined emotional abuse power (14 to 70 points)	59.11 (9.93)	64.84 (6.28)	$t(347) = 6.40^{**}$
Physical abuse power with privilege for wives (3 to 15 points)	12.94 (2.31)	12.90 (2.57)	$t(344) = 0.17$
Physical abuse power with privilege for husbands (3 to 15 points)	13.43 (2.55)	13.81 (2.07)	$t(344) = 1.51$
Combined physical abuse power (6 to 30 points)	27.06 (3.84)	27.08 (4.12)	$t(317) = 0.04$

(standard deviations shown in parentheses)

* $p < .001$
* $p < .0005$

Subjects' total AMPS scores were not related to their ages, $r(324) = -.05$, $p>.05$.

Relations between Revised CTS, Revised Shortened AWS, and AMPS

Experiences in witnessing marital violence, as measured by the revised CTS, and attitudes to women, as measured by the revised Shortened AWS, were unrelated for females, $r(142) = .03$, $p>.05$, and for males, $r(145) = .12$, $p>05$. Females' experiences in witnessing marital violence were not related to their beliefs about exercise of power in marital relationships, as measured by the AMPS, $r(133) = -.03$, $p>.05$. However, for male students, reports of more violence between parents were modestly associated with less egalitarian attitudes about the exercise of power over marital partners, $r(133) = -.18$, $p<.035$. As can be seen in Table 3, the strongest association was found between the physical aggression subscale of the revised CTS and the subscales for the AMPS; for males, all emotional and physical abuse subscales of the AMPS were related to the extent of physical violence reportedly observed between their parents.

Discussion

Analyses with the revised CTS indicate that females recall a level of violence within their homes significantly higher than that reported by males. Ulbrich and Huber (1981) suggest that girls may actually witness more violence due to their inability to dissuade such violence relative to boys who may be physically stronger; such an influence would not be expected until well into adolescence however. Ulbrich and Huber further

Table 3

Correlations Between Attitudes toward Marital Power Scales and Revised CTS Subscales

	CTS	CTS	CTS	CTS
	MALES	MALES	FEMALES	FEMALES
AMPS SUBSCALES	VERBAL AGGRESSION INDEX	PHYSICAL AGGRESSION INDEX	VERBAL AGGRESSION INDEX	PHYSICAL AGGRESSION INDEX
CONTROLLING POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES	.033 (141)	-.152 (140)	-.170* (144)	-.060 (141)
CONTROLLING POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS	.137 (143)	-.099 (142)	.002 (144)	-.010 (141)
EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES	-.173* (141)	-.236** (141)	-.055 (144)	-.101 (141)
EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS	-.157 (141)	-.250** (140)	-.051 (144)	-.159 (141)
COMBINED EMOTIONAL ABUSE POWER	-.173* (141)	-.258** (140)	-.055 (144)	-.133 (141)
PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR WIVES	-.210* (140)	-.205* (139)	-.130 (143)	-.207* (141)
PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER WITH PRIVILEGE FOR HUSBANDS	-.116 (140)	-.287** (139)	-.068 (143)	-.230* (141)
COMBINED PHYSICAL ABUSE POWER	-.210* (126)	-.334*** (128)	-.077 (134)	-.200* (132)

(degrees of freedom shown in parentheses)

* $p < .05$
** $p < .005$
*** $p < .0005$

suggest that males may report lower levels of violence because of selective attention: if they believe force to be a legitimate means of controlling a woman's behaviour, then they may ignore violence. Another possibility is that females' higher reports of violence reflect a broader internal definition of what constitutes interpersonal violence (such as verbal aggression) and a greater sensitivity toward acts of conflict behaviour which threaten valued relationships.

Reports, by both females and males, of similar levels of violence perpetrated by wives and by husbands seem to contradict all conventional wisdom associated with the "male mystique" (Thompson, 1991) of men being more aggressive, especially within the home; moreover, such a finding is contrary to the experience of countless service providers across the country (Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women, 1991). The finding of this study is not, however, unusual, as repeated studies with the Conflict Tactics Scale have suggested similar levels of aggression by husbands and wives (e.g., Straus & Gelles, 1990). This may reflect an important limitation of the CTS and the revision of the CTS used in this study: the CTS failes to distinguish between behaviour which reflects instrumental aggression and behaviour which is self-defensive. Alternatively, adolescents' reports of similar levels of violence perpetrated by mothers and fathers might reflect a functional reconstruction of memory, an effort to evenly divide between both parents responsibility for the conflict, thereby protecting the sense of relationship with each parent. Yet another possibility is that any act of

aggression by women is so contrary to the traditional role of nurturing wife that it may be extremely salient (and thereby overreported) in subjects' memories.

Subjects' responses on the AMPS reveal that both females and males endorse more egalitarian than controlling or abusive attitudes about exercise of power in marital relationships. At the same time, excepting the area of power through physical abuse, strongly rejected by females and males, males are more tolerant than are females about exercise of power. Surprisingly, this is the case even when the controlling or emotionally abusive power is said to be exercised by wives over husbands. Why would males be more likely to support "someone" having power--regardless of whether the "someone" is female or male? Why would females exhibit more egalitarian attitudes than males, even when they have opportunities to endorse statements giving wives greater privilege over husbands?

One possible explanation may be found in the different communication styles used by females and males. Males tend to talk more, interrupt more, and be more assertive in social situations than females (e.g., Cook, Fritz, McCornack, & Visperas, 1985). Females are more likely to voice uncertainty, make requests in the form of statements instead of direct imperatives, and be polite (e.g., McMillan, Clifton, McGrath, & Gale, 1977). AMPS items reflecting control and emotional abuse (e.g., "Sometimes wives have to tell their husbands they aren't handsome") may be more consistent with males' direct, declarative style of communicating, and thus more likely to be endorsed by them.

Another possibility rests in the patterns of moral thinking that may have been used by subjects in making their decisions about items on the AMPS. As Gilligan (1982) and others have described, females and males tend to approach moral reasoning and decision making from importantly different perspectives. Females may be inclined to see the world through a morality rooted in the importance of building and maintaining relationships. Males may be more inclined to interpret their experience through a morality tied to a strong system of rules and regulations. Perhaps our female respondents are endorsing responses consistent with the maintenance of balance and mutual influence that ought to be reflected in nurturing relationships. Perhaps our male respondents are more likely to endorse those items reflecting a clearly ordered, unambiguous, and precise way of doing things, such as may be perceived when one person is clearly in charge.

The lack of association between witnessing violence and attitudes toward women is consistent with previous findings by Ulbrich and Huber (1981). Clearly, the influences upon development of such attitudes are many; no one linear explanation can tie witnessing marital violence to restrictive attitudes toward women. The modest relations between male adolescents' reports of witnessing violence between their parents and their own attitudes about exercise of power in the marital relationship may also reflect complexity, not only in the sources of attitudes about power but also in the consequences of witnessing violence. Exploring such complexities will be valuable not only because of their

intrinsic interest, but also because of their critically important implications for so many children and families.

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